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Familiarity & Unfamiliarity

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Cover Page Footnote

Luyi Huang graduated from Pitzer College in May 2019 with a degree in Environmental Analysis and a minor in Studio Art. She participated in Envirolab in 2018 as a fellow of the performance art clinic lab. She is from Guangzhou, China.

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Fig. 1: Dance Practice in Mangrove Forest. Photo Credit: Luyi Huang

On our last day in Thailand, on January 6, 2018, I took this photo of my groupmates, smiling under the tropical heat of Thailand. Together, we were working on a performance piece in the Mangrove forest of the King's Project in Chanthaburi, Thailand. Our group had four students from Burapha University, two from the Claremont Colleges and one from the Yale-NUS College. Our performance group was part of Envirolab Asia, which in 2018 comprised three main research clinic labs that had students whose academic interests ranged from environmental science and Southeast Asia history to performance and visual arts. During the day, we were assigned to participate in a rotation of activities that overlapped each lab's research goals, such as collecting samples from the mangrove forest, community interview with locals, and producing sounds that mimic the forest and ocean.

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At night, we came back together as a bigger group to reflect on and share what we had learned throughout the day, and also to start rehearsing our big performance for the final two days of this trip. Our mission was to combine community oral history, local environmental challenges, and community-based theater techniques, and translate them into a theatrical performance. In our final performance, we invited community members and created a continuous site performance



Fig. 2: Thai and US Students Performing in Mangrove Forest.

project. Audience members walked along the pathway in the mangrove forest and had a performance waiting for them in about seven different locations. The idea was to express climate change, societal issues, and local resilience through our body movement—a universal language that crosses linguistic and mental barriers.

Throughout the process, I started reflecting on the relationship between “teachers” and “students,” between the “performers” and “audience.” I realized that even though I was the “performer” and we played the role of informing the local community about the environmental challenges, in fact, I was the “audience” of this intense learning experience. Not only did I learn about the pressures confronting the community and its resilience in the face of these pressures, but through our active engagement with the local people and my peers, I was also able to reflect on another challenge: how to embrace the unfamiliar and familiar.

First of all, the language barrier was the main unfamiliarity between Thai and American students. We did not understand Thai and they did not speak English. It was a process of trusting each other and to be open to using our body language to communicate. It was difficult when there

were only a few words that we could use to express our thoughts and ideas. For example, when Seven (who is a Thai theater major student) told me that she wanted us to face the audience in a certain direction, she only used the word “audience” and then directed me to the spot with her body language. Later on, this process became more familiar when I had to apply limited words to communicate with my group mates as well. I was reminded of the time when I did not know English at all and it was a moment where I had so much familiarity that their stories became mine and mine became theirs.

I started thinking about how we can be most efficient with language choices to facilitate communication. Furthermore, I wonder how many languages played a role in expressing genuine and fundamental human emotions. When communication is simplified and condensed, we then are forced to express straightforwardly and effectively with limited words and body language. Without a proficient level of the Thai language, I felt a sense of welcoming and intimacy from the other two groups of students. Besides, I found that traveling itself has an intrinsic characteristic of unfamiliarity. I gained understanding and appreciation that we might all inhabit different cultures and languages, but at the same time, there is a core spirit that pushes us out of our comfort zone and connects with our unique selves—individually and collectively.

An insight that Ghazaleh Lowe reaffirms and extends when she writes:

The clue is for you to find your certainty of me in the unfamiliar as all I can ever offer you is the very moment you are in and this moment is one moment, it doesn't have day and night, yesterday or tomorrow. This moment is the now and the now doesn't finish, the stories of the now offer so much familiarity and at times unfamiliarity, however, it is the feeling that is deep beneath any thought, any story and any mind that is ultimately what you are searching for. I ask of you not to search for me as it's in your search for me that you then separate from you, 'the you' that is already me.